

An Emotional Perspective On Political Attack Advertising

Kirsten Passyn, kpassyn@citadel.edu

ABSTRACT

Political pundits on both sides of the aisle agree America is in a profound political crisis, bigger than Vietnam or Watergate. This “mess,” however, did not begin with the most recent “wretched, dishonest and manipulative” presidential campaign, but it was this election that made “a lot of Americans decide they no longer wished” to be engaged on any level with politics. (Silvergate, 2017). On average, less than 55% of the American voting-age population votes. Trust in the Federal Government is significantly below historical averages, reaching an unparalleled low of 18%. It is not only a time of political crisis but unprecedented political disengagement.

Previous political research has noted a negative correlation between political attack ads and trust in government. Findings are contradictory on the impact of political attack ads on voting intentions. We make a distinction between emotional versus rational processing of political attack ads. Specifically, we propose that political attack ads can evoke a disgust response. The emotion of disgust is a revulsion response that elicits a strong motivation to withdraw, avoid and reject the offensive object (Rozin et al. 1999). This research hypothesizes that when political attack ads are processed emotionally, (H1) the disgust response will occur leading to avoidance and to withdrawal. This will ultimately result in (H2) decreased voting intentions, (H3) decreased trust in government, and (H4) decreased political aspirations.

The hypotheses are tested in two studies. Study 1 primes rational or emotional processing of the same political attack ads and finds emotional processing to lead to a disgust response. In line with the disgust response of avoidance and withdrawal, participants in the emotional condition report a decrease in voting intentions, trust in government, and political aspirations. The means from Study 1 are reported in the table below and are reflective of the findings in both studies. In Study 2, the emotion versus rational prime is embedded into an ad advocating political engagement. As in Study 1, participants in the emotion prime condition self-report feelings of disgust as well as decreased voting intentions, decreased trust in government, and decreased political aspirations as compared to participants in the rational condition. Embedding the prime into an ad suggests a way non-profits such as *The League of Women Voters* or *Get out the Vote* can mitigate the dampening of political involvement.

STUDY 1 MEANS

	Disgust	Voting Intentions	Trust in Government	Political Involvement
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Emotional Processing Condition	6.14 (1.80)	5.23 (2.01)	1.92 (0.23)	1.39 (1.11)
Rational Processing Condition	4.51 (1.79)	6.06 (1.65)	2.06 (0.32)	1.94 (1.52)

Figure 1 Comparison of means in bold to other means in the column, $p < .05$

Previous research has found mixed effects of attack advertising on political engagement. This research finds the dampening effect to be dependent on emotional processing and the disgust/avoidance response. Combined, these studies illustrate that political advertising can evoke disgust thereby triggering an avoidance response aimed at overall political involvement. Importantly, as found in Study 2, voter outreach groups can reduce this effect when consumers are encouraged to process their analysis of candidates rationally. Thus, the public policy recommendation from this study is that organizations interested in increasing voter turnout and political involvement should promote voting with messages encouraging rational, analytical processing.

Limitations of this research include the use of unknown political candidates and testing in a controlled laboratory environment. Thus, future research should examine how political candidate knowledge may change the disgust response. Specifically, a field test examining voters' response to early, mid, and late political attack ads would extend these findings and enhance external validity. Future research could also test the pervasiveness of the rational prime at mitigating the disgust effect. In these studies, the prime directly preceded the attack ad. Finally, in this study, we investigate the impact of state based emotional/rational processing. The mixed findings in the literature suggest the need for a better understanding of individual differences leading to rational versus emotional processing tendencies.

These findings demand our attention. Although additional research is needed, our results offer a possible explanation for our demotivated electorate; voter turnout in 2016 Presidential election dipped to a 20 year low with only 55% of eligible voters casting a ballot (Levine 2016). With polls finding 82% of consumers' disgusted with the election (Martin, Sussman, and Thee-Brenan 2016), the findings in this study, though previously untested, that attack ads evoke disgust is unsurprising. The first contribution of this research is in the understanding that these ads can be processed emotionally or rationally. The second contribution is that ads and other messaging

encouraging rational processing can mitigate the deleterious effects of low voter turn-out and political disengagement.

References:

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Keywords: political attack ads, disgust, public policy

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners:

Insights into how to motivate voter turnout, trust in government, and political engagement in an increasingly disgusted population.

Track: Advertising/Direct Marketing

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